DANUBE AND AVON
Shakespeare in Elysium: Romanian Afterlives

AFTERWORD

RICHARD WILSON

The Virgilian title of *Shakespeare in Elysium: Romanian Afterlives* challenges us to think about their Romanian reception as a privileged channel between these English plays and the classical world. But the essays in this voluble collection also develop an irresistible argument that, with their own highly dramatic modern history, Romania's actors, audiences, directors, readers, scholars and writers have played a uniquely fluent role in channeling this four-hundred-year-old theatrical legacy into the twenty-first century. The story they therefore have to tell is of a transcontinental passage across many lands and ages, with detours and obstructions all along the way, which is driven by an unstoppable impulse to creative freedom.

The grand narrative of *Shakespeare in Elysium* makes for a compelling itinerary, and evokes the mighty Romanian river that has actually connected European civilization to the world of Greece and Rome. This is the 'impatient' Danube, which in his poem 'The Ister,' Hölderlin famously imagined as the locus of poetry itself, after Hercules had voyaged on it 'to look for shadows.' 'Beautifully he dwells,' and 'here we wish to dwell,' sang the poet of the river, 'For rivers make arable the land.'[1] Heidegger, lecturing on this hymn to the Danube at one of Europe's darkest hours, spoke of the transnational river as the sum of all its relations, for 'The poet is the river. And the river is the poet' [165].[2] And by a coincidence that is truly *unheimlich*, Shakespeare's most poetic vision of the journey to Elysium follows the 'impatient' course of a river which also sounds uncannily Danubian, not least in having a big mouth made for kissing:

> The more you damm'st it up, the more it burns.
> The current that with gentle murmur glides,

[1] Friedrich Hölderlin, *Selected Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Penguin, 1998), 'The Ister,' ll. 22-3, 255.
[2] All quotations of the 'Ister' lectures are from Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister,'* trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), and are referred to parenthetically in the text.

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Thou know'st, being stopped, impatiently doth rage.
But when his fair course is not hinderèd
He makes sweet music with th'enamelled stones,
Giving a gentle kiss to every sedge
He overtaketh in his pilgrimage.
And so by many winding brooks he strays
With willing sport to the wild ocean.
Then let me go, and hinder not my course.
I'll be as patient as a gentle stream,
And make a pastime of each weary step
Till the last step have brought me to my love.
And there I'll rest as after much turmoil
A blessèd soul doth in Elysium.

[*Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 2.7.24-38]

Biographers who speculate, as did Tom Stoppard in *Shakespeare in Love*, that the Bard was 'made tongue-tied by authority' [Sonnet 66], and suffered a writer's block, or even a speech impediment, would find support in this therapeutic model of the liberated waterway singing 'sweet music' through a mouthful of polished pebbles.[3] Shakespeare's 'hindered' torrent, which descends from the mountains, then widens across fertile plains towards its delta, through which it wanders in a multitude of branches, before reaching the freedom of the oceans, is a beautifully 'blue' Danubian symbol of his own global influence.[4] The poet 'cares' for the meandering river [55], as a trope for this 'pilgrimage' across time and space, because, as Heidegger mused, the transitive 'essence of the river' is at once impediment and release, 'locality and journeying… The river is the locality of journeying. The river is the journeying of locality' [43].

The emancipated river is a recurring Shakespearean metaphor for perseveration, the stutterer's diversionary tactic to evade obstruction by repetition or circumlocution, and 'By indirections find directions out' [*Hamlet*, 2.1.64]. Such a riparian paralinguistic formula seems particularly applicable, therefore, to Shakespeare's Romanian reception, which, as the contributors to this volume remind us, has come only 'after much turmoil,' involving the navigation of authoritarianism, censorship and repression. And the fluvial figure emerges as especially apt for the present title, originating as it does in Constanta, which the ancients grounded on the isthmus between the Black Sea and the arc of the curving

[3] See Marc Shell, *Stutter* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 169-200.
[4] For 'blue Shakespeare' studies, see Gwilym Jones, *Shakespeare's Storms* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun (eds.), *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2004); and Steve Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* (London: Continuum, 2009).

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Danube, when Shakespeare's Julia rests in her imagination on a bar at the mouth of the estuary, as 'A blessèd soul doth in Elysium'.

Shakespeare's riverine heroine, who burbles like his own unstopped mouthpiece, is invoking the Elysian Fields, where Virgil's Aeneas watches the heroes dancing on the 'yellow sands' [*Tempest*, 1.2.378-81], and climbs a headland to witness his descendants: 'men of Italian stock' who 'extend Rome's empire to a land beyond the stars.'[5] But the editor, Monica Matei-Chesniou, instead asks us to associate the imaginary geography of this site of prophecy and remembrance with the worldwide Shakespearean community, whether gathered at the Stratford Memorial Theatre itself, on the banks of the Avon, or 'upon a promontory' [2.1.149] of what, in her earlier book *Shakespeare in the Romanian Cultural Memory*, she calls 'a liminal space at the cultural margin of Europe … a place somewhere near the Black Sea and the Danube, where Shakespeare has been performed, translated and interpreted successfully for almost two centuries.'[6]

The real European Commission of the Danube, convened to regulate navigation through the delta by the 1856 Treaty of Paris that ended the Crimean War, is said to have marked a revolution in international law, when for the first time in history a collegiate body was constituted with judicial powers, complete with flag and personnel that had independent quasi-sovereign status. This organization, charged with dredging the mouths of the river, was not only a forerunner of the League of Nations, the United Nations and the European Community, historians tell us, but the entire modern system of multilateral cooperation, since its mission was to 'develop a set of rules which will be the foundation of the super-state itself.'[7]

The Danube Commission is considered a precursor of the European Union. Yet Romanians know how bitterly, during its eighty-two-year existence, this collective forum of navigational expertise was resented by their nation, not least because of the role of Western European technocrats. Romania had no desire to host an elite experiment in world government at the expense of its territorial integrity. Swept away by the Nazis, the Commission reconstituted under Soviet eyes in 1948 is a ghost of its former glory. Yet now that the international order the original delta Commission inaugurated is everywhere threatened by populist tribalism, the old Danubian College has acquired a retrospective luster.[8] And in the age of Putin,

[5] Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Bk. 6, 644,758 & 794, trans. David West (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 133-7.
[6] Monica Matei-Chesniou, *Shakespeare in the Romanian Cultural Memory* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006), 26.
[7] Edward Krehbiel, 'The European Commission of the Danube: An Experiment in International Administration,' *Political Science Quarterly*, 33 (March 1918).
[8] The history and influence of the original Danube Commission is currently the subject of a major European research project at the University of Utrecht.

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Trump and Brexit, the poets' vision of the river as just such a civilizing consilience looks more necessary than ever.

Hölderlin poeticized the untimely way its contraflows made the Danube appear to change its mind and reverse direction: 'Yet almost this river seems / To travel backward and / I think it must come from / The East.'[9] Another uncanny coincidence is, therefore, that Shakespeare appears to have been fascinated by similar whirlpools in the course of the Avon, when its 'violent roaring tide / Outruns the eye that doth behold his haste, / Yet in the eddy boundeth in his pride / Back to the strait that forced him out so fast.' So persistent is this turning picture that Caroline Spurgeon used her own diagram of the phenomenon, which she observed under Stratford's ancient bridge, where the flood 'in rage sent out' is 'recalled in rage being past' [*Lucrece*, 1667-71], as a frontispiece of her celebrated book *Shakespeare's Imagery and What it Tells Us*.

The recursive swirling vortex which Julia calls the river's 'willing sport' was one of the 'sights of boyhood,' Spurgeon fancied, that 'made the most indelible impression on Shakespeare's imagination.'[10] And this romantic fantasy of poetic second thoughts gains weight from what Heidegger said about Hölderlin's hymn to the repetition compulsion of the Danube. Writing in the summer of 1942, when the Fascist armies, including those of Romania, had overrun Europe from the Channel to the Volga, and the decisive battle for Stalingrad was about to commence, the philosopher of *Dasein* and *Heimat* astonishingly pondered on the regressive 'swirling backwards' of the Danube as a dialectical figure for the continent's historic openness, hospitality and interdependence:

> The Ister appears to go backwards. It appears as though it does not go forward or away from the source at all. Yet the Ister does not merely go backwards. How does the appearance of its almost going backwards arise in the first instance? Because it flows hesitantly: such hesitancy can come only from there being a mysterious counterflow that pushes counter to its originary springing forth. The sight thus arises of the Ister sometimes standing still … and swirling backwards [*in Wirbeln*] … In such hesitancy the poet intimates the mysterious concealment of the intertwining relations between the foreign and one's own. The Ister almost goes backwards because, remaining at the source, it has arrived alongside it from the East. In hesitating, its flowing appears in one direction *and* the other. The flowing is not directly in either of the two directions. The relation to the foreign is never a mere taking over of the Other. The relation to one's own is never a mere self-assured affirmation of the so-called "natural" or "organic" [143].

[9] Hölderlin, ll. 41-4, 257.
[10] Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What it Tells Us* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), 92.

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For Heidegger, the poet's thinking of its 'enigmatic course' [144] makes the wavering Danube 'that river in which the foreign is already present as a guest at its source, that river in whose flowing there constantly speaks the dialogue between one's own and the foreign' [146]. Hölderlin had written that 'Much could / Be said' about the river's hesitating contraflow.[11] But what the German philosopher had to say concerning cross-currents, in terms of the vital necessity to 'let what is foreign come' into Europe's 'guest-house,' and 'to become more open, so that what "illuminates" is "open to our view,"' was itself so alien to what was supposedly 'homely' for this thinker [124], that it may be significant that this last section of his text remained undelivered when the 'Ister' lecture course abruptly ended on July 14 1942.[12]

Through its anachronistic reflux, the river 'satisfies the law of becoming homely as the law of being unhomely' theorized Heidegger [164]. His praise of the Danube's 'readiness to acknowledge the foreigner' [141] has been criticized for its 'orientalism.'[13] But it is the essence of this 'multidirectional thinking' [151] that, though the river does 'leave the mountains to go into the broad plains of the East' [146], 'what that one does, that river, / No one knows,' in the poem's final cryptic words.[14] Thus, in the middle of a world conflict in which the Danube was the scene of so much violence, such retreating waters were 'intended to serve as signs of something else,' Heidegger emphasized; so, when the poet 'says "a sign is needed"… the sign can only be the name for the poet himself. Then the words "a sign is needed..." are saying "only" this. A poet and poets must be. A poet is needed' [148-50]:

> Not for nothing rivers flow
> Through dry land. But how? A sign is needed.[15]

'A sign is needed': for Heidegger, writing at the cataclysmic turning point of the Second World War, the poet of the reversible Danube himself became the directional 'sign' of which he spoke. Likewise, at what may be another world-historical turning point, *Shakespeare in Elysium* invites us to consider the 'Sweet Swan of Avon' to be the crucial riparian 'sign' we need today, and the Danubian symbol of a similar international confluence: in Matei-Chesniou's inviting and nostalgic formulation, a place 'where we celebrate who we are by entertaining and

[11] Hölderlin, l. 45, 257.
[12] For the undelivered incomplete status of the text, see 'Editor's Epilogue,' Heidegger, 170.
[13] See Lin Ma, *Heidegger on East-West Dialogue: Anticipating the event* (London: Routledge, 2000), 113-16.
[14] Hölderlin, ll. 72-3, 259.
[15] Ibid, ll. 49-50, 257.

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revisiting the previously established locations of cultural memory.' More than ever, for sure, such a poet of return is needed.

The idea of Shakespeare as a river reprising 'the mind of Europe' was rendered toxic by *The Waste Land*, where Eliot's citation of how 'This music crept by me upon the waters' [*Tempest*, 1.2.395] was poisoned by 'the corrupted currents' [*Hamlet*, 3.3.57] of the 1920s. If Shakespeare's 'river sweats' in this recycling that is because it is polluted by the poet's own reactionary politics.[16] The same may be true of Heidegger's Danube. But *Shakespeare in Elysium* reminds us that it is possible to read Shakespeare's impression of how 'currents turn awry / And lose the name of action,' less as 'the pale cast of thought' [3.1.87-90], than as the cast of critical thought itself, and a return of enlightenment. Such was the reading of Edward Said, the author of *Orientalism*, who could imagine no better model for his own 'multidirectional thinking' than Shakespeare:

> Each age re-interprets Shakespeare, not because Shakespeare changes, but because despite the existence of numerous and reliable editions of Shakespeare, there is no such fixed and trivial object independent of his editors, the actors who played his roles, the translators who put him in other languages, the hundreds of millions of readers who have read him or watched performances of his plays since the late sixteenth century. On the other hand, it is too much to say Shakespeare has no independent existence at all, and that he is completely reconstituted every time someone reads, acts, or writes about him. In fact Shakespeare leads an institutional life that among other things has guaranteed his eminence as a great poet, his authorship of thirty-odd plays, his extraordinary canonical powers.[17]

Said's argument about the impossibility of standing 'at some Archimedean point' outside a region or river in 'perpetual flux' was, he admitted, 'rudimentary.'[18] What was noteworthy was how Shakespeare provided the illustration, as though the plays were drafts for the 'East / West divan' to which this Palestinian intellectual aspired. If Europe has no constitution, Said's attitude implies, that might be because its Magna Carta is Shakespeare. The Bard has become the 'unacknowledged legislator' Heidegger hailed, when the philosopher said poets are rivers that 'ground the dwelling of human beings on earth' [166].[19] And such was Jacques Derrida's belief, when he eulogized Shakespeare for offering 'a rule of cohabitation' to the

[16] T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), 39-49, at 39; 'The Waste Land' in *The Poems of T.S. Eliot: Volume 1: Collected and Uncollected Poems*, ed. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), ll. 257 & 266, 64-5.
[17] Edward Said, '*Orientalism* Reconsidered,' *Cultural Critique*, 1 (1985), 89-107, at 92.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defense of Poetry,' in *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Harry Buxton Forman (London: Reeves & Turner, 1880), 144.

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continent's 'disordered plurivocality,' 'it being understood that this house will always be haunted rather than inhabited by the meaning of the original':

> This is the stroke of genius… the signature of the Thing "Shakespeare": to authorize each one of the translations, to make them possible and intelligible without ever being reducible to them.[20]

'Rivers are the poets upon whose ground human beings dwell' [147]: Heidegger's maxim gains gravity from accounts of Danubian productions. Romanian Shakespeareans are authorized to view a disintegrating United Kingdom, too, from their 'promontory' on the farther shore of Europe. And Trojan Hecuba, the archetypal abused woman, haunts these pages, after the seizure by a serial abuser of the American presidency. For it is the fate of *Shakespeare in Elysium* to appear 'as on a darkling plain,' like that of *Troilus and Cressida*: 'Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight.'[21] In Olivia Manning's *Fortunes of War*, the audience who thrilled to Shakespeare's play about the Fall of Troy emerge onto the streets of Bucharest and the stunning news of the Fall of Paris: 'Harriet said, "I'd forgotten Paris." "I too," said Nikko. They had all forgotten Paris.'[22] That was 1940. But there is a cold current running through Elysium in 2017 that suggests Shakespeare can never again be a mere distraction for Romania:

> Like to the Pontic Sea,
> Whose icy current and compulsive course
> Ne'er knows retiring ebb, but keeps due on
> To the Propontic and the Hellespont…
>
> [*Othello,* 3.3.456-9]

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[20] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 22.
[21] Matthew Arnold, 'Dover Beach,' *Matthew Arnold: Selected Poetry*, ed. Keith Silver (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994), ll. 35-6, 106.
[22] Olivia Manning, *Fortunes of War: The Great Fortune* (London: Mandarin, 1994), 280.

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